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SUBJECT: WHO DOES EVANGELOS VENIZELOS THINK HE IS?

Classified By: Political Counselor Robin Quinville. Reason: 1.4 (b) a
nd (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Vigorous campaigning is underway across Greece as candidates for the leadership of opposition socialist PASOK try to rally support. The real battle is between incumbent George Papandreou and main challenger Evangelis Venizelos (the third candidate, Skandalides, is assumed to have no chance). Papandreou continues to hold a steady lead in the polls, but much will depend on how many friends and supporters participate in the November 11 election. Many PASOKies are deeply dissatisfied with Papandreou's leadership, but are unclear what Venizelos actually stands for. On key foreign policy issues, our past conversations with Venizelos show he is primarily concerned about Greek-Turkish relations and Turkey's EU prospects. On Macedonia, his private support for a compromise some months ago may be changing as the leadership campaign heats up. Venizelos's overall reputation as a sharp, witty, bullying critic may also be working against him and for Papandreou -- whose gentle, egalitarian demeanor is precisely the opposite.

END SUMMARY.

VENIZELOS'S PUGNACIOUS REPUTATION

¶2. (C) Born in 1957, even Venizelos's name is subject to debate. It is rumored that his original family name was Tombuzoglou, and that he changed it to elicit associations with noted Greek statesman Eleftherios Venizelos. Venizelos himself denies it, and neither he nor his detractors have put forward documentary evidence either way. Early on, he displayed the characteristics that define his reputation today: he is ambitious, pugnacious, caustic, proud. Venizelos became a professor of constitutional law at Thessaloniki University, a position he still holds. He was elected to parliament in 1993, and has held cabinet posts at the ministries of Culture, Justice, and Press. Although he began his career as a staunch defender of Andreas Papandreou, he later sided with the "modernist" wing emerging under future PM and PASOK leader Kostas Simitis. But when Simitis himself left office, Venizelos -- despite his ambitions -- was bypassed and George Papandreou tapped as PASOK leader.

¶3. (C) Venizelos is a clever and compelling speaker who does not suffer fools gladly. His face wears a natural frown, and he effectively wields a high-faluting vocabulary to illustrate his dissatisfaction. He has used his internet blog to take potshots at George (as well as the New Democracy government) for the past year. It was therefore no surprise when, immediately after PASOK's loss in the September 16 general elections, Venizelos immediately tried to oust Papandreou from the leadership. What some PASOKies have termed an "attempted coup" did not succeed, and Venizelos has run steadily behind George in the intervening weeks.

WE KNOW HIS REPUTATION -- BUT WHAT'S HE FOR?

¶4. (C) Some PASOKies complain that it is hard to know Venizelos's "vision" for Greece; he's better at criticizing

than creating. For example, on recognition of private educational institutions (an issue which roiled Greek politics for months), Venizelos told us he was "open-minded."

However, he drew a distinction between private non-profit and for-profit universities: the latter, he said, could not be trusted.

15. (C) Venizelos has little practical foreign policy experience. On Greece-Turkey relations, he has cultivated the public impression that he leans toward the "hawks." Nevertheless, as Minister of Culture, he initiated the Greek-Turkish protocol on reforming history school books to reduce mutual hostility in their curricula. He has told us privately that he sees Greece's relationship with Turkey as its major foreign policy challenge (though it is unclear to what degree he supports improving Greek-Turkish relations). He suggested that, as it becomes clear that Turkey does not have real EU prospects, Greece will need to craft an approach based on bilateral engagement, development of Sarkozy's Mediterranean Union, and dealing with the "parked" Cyprus problem. This, he added, will be politically costly for Greece, which has so far relied on EU leverage to achieve its objectives. Without the EU carrot, Greece will have to give as well as get -- a major paradigm shift. It is telling, however, that while raising the issue with us, he left us with little concrete impression of what exact policy he would recommend.

16. (C) On the Cyprus issue, Venizelos was an early proponent of the Annan Plan, a rare instance of agreement with Papandreou. But Venizelos is also capable of changing course. In April 2004, Venizelos openly criticized Cypriot President Papadopoulos in a major newspaper column. But in May 2007, Venizelos traveled to Cyprus, met with

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Papadopoulos, and told reporters that PASOK and he were "never on a collision course with the President of the Cypriot Republic."

17. (C) On Macedonia, Venizelos, as a northerner, is publicly presumed to be hard-line. Nevertheless, he told us privately a few months ago that he was attracted to the Nimetz concept of a "Grand Bargain," in which -- in return for a commitment to work for Skopje's benefit -- Macedonia compromises on the name. Venizelos argued that Greece could not be "passive;" all it needed was "one complicated name" for Skopje's entry into European institutions "and we should be prepared to pay something to Skopje to get it." But now, several months later, Venizelos's views are less clear, at least in public. On October 6, Venizelos charged the government with "complete blankness" on how to handle the dispute. At the same time, he offered no proposals for change.

COMMENT

18. (C) In meetings with the Embassy and ConGen Thessaloniki, Venizelos strikes us as erudite, knowledgeable, witty, a bit obnoxious and, while not anti-American, not a great admirer of the U.S. He speaks excellent English, and is versatile and articulate. He is also cagey. In the leadership debate, PASOKies have so far focused on personalities, not policies. Venizelos's sharp elbows may be handy in a general election, but party stalwarts fear that, if Venizelos became party leader, they'd be nudged to the sidelines. That's working in Papandreou's favor.

COUNTRYMAN